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U.S. courted Iran to counter buildup of 600 Soviet agents

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When the Reagan administration launched its secret effort to restore relations with Iran, the U.S. intelligence community believed the Soviet Union already had 600 agents in Tehran poised to direct Iranian communists in a post-Khomeini power struggle, it was learned yesterday.

It is not clear whether those agents were embassy personnel or undercover operatives, said a source closely connected to U.S. intelligence officials.

President Reagan has said that the growing Soviet influence in Iran was a major motivation for the effort he authorized in January that eventually led to shipments of arms to "moderates" in Iran.

Mr. Reagan has not revealed details of the Soviet buildup. But it is known that the Soviets have massed military forces on the Iranian border.

The source, who asked not to be identified, said the Soviet buildup included moving "600 agents into the Soviet Embassy in Iran" during the time the Reagan administration was preparing its overtures to what it believed was a moderate faction in Tehran.

The additional Soviets in Iran are working with pro-Soviet elements within the Khomeini regime and with the Iranian communist party, the Tudeh, which was severely crippled early in the Khomeini era.

U.S. intelligence officials believed that the Soviets were counting on the Tudeh to play a role in a post-Khomeini power struggle. Such a struggle could erupt upon the death of the 86-year-old religious leader — who many believe is ill — or in the wake of a disastrous military offensive against Iraq.

The officials believed that the long-planned "final offensive" against Iraq would fail, creating enough political turmoil in Tehran to topple the ayatollah and leaving a power vacuum that the Tudeh or other Soviet allies would fill. Under the terms of a 1921 treaty, never re-

nounced, the Soviets have to right to intervene in Iran militarily if the Moscow government deems the internal situation in Iran threatens the security of the Soviet Union.

The "moderate" forces identified by the U.S. intelligence community appear to be the faction led by Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, 52. He is known to favor pragmatic relations with other nations to increase Iran's military might, and has been opposed by more leftist elements surrounding President Ali Khamenei, 47, and Prime Minister Mir-Hussein Musavi, 43.

Mr. Khamenei and Mr. Musavi are, even by Iranian standards, strongly anti-Western, and have urged increasing government control of the economy and a redistribution of wealth. Their emphasis has been on "purifying" the revolution domestically.

Mr. Rafsanjani, however, is also the main patron in the leadership of the Revolutionary Guards, and has been personally favored by Ayatollah Khomeini for his determined pursuit of the war with Iraq. He has also repeatedly warned the Persian Gulf states to "fall into line."

Relations between Moscow and Tehran have frequently been appalling. From 1981 to 1983, the ayatollah crushed the Tudeh, and as many as 10,000 died in that campaign, according to some reports. The ayatollah has publicly referred to Soviet "barbarism," and on one occasion stalked out of a meeting with Soviet Ambassador Vladimir Vinogradov in anger over his "atheism."

Nevertheless, those chilly relations have been thawing lately. On Oct. 9, Tehran news reports quoted Soviet President Andrei Gromyko as telling the new Iranian ambassador to Moscow, Nasser Heirani Nobari, that "Soviet experts will soon return to Iran." Mr. Gromyko added that the Soviet Union wanted an expansion of friendly ties with Iran "despite ideological differences."

Soviet advisers were withdrawn from Iran last year after an escalation of Iraqi air raids.

In August, Iran announced it would resume natural gas deliveries to the Soviet Union. They had been suspended since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. And in September, the

first joint session of the Iranian-Soviet Chamber of Commerce, held in Tehran, approved plans to increase the annual volume of trade between the two nations to \$1 billion.

Ironically, if the U.S. overtures toward Iran were motivated by fear of Soviet influence, the warmer Soviet attitude toward Tehran seems to have been partly motivated by fear of growing Chinese influence. In September 1985, China signed a \$1.6 billion arms deal with Iran for the supply of heavy weapons. Mr. Rafsanjani, who visited Peking last year, appears to have been a leading architect of this connection.

Iran shares a 1,250-mile frontier with the Soviet Union. Twice this century, in 1914 and 1941, Russia occupied northern Iran in cooperation with British forces in the southern half of the country.

A Soviet occupation of Iran would bring the Soviet Union to the Persian Gulf and give it control over the main oil supply route for Western Europe and Japan — a possibility that has been the nightmare of Western defense planners for the past 40 years.

The Soviets, however, have experienced a bitter guerrilla war in Afghanistan since occupying the country in December 1979, and would probably fear getting bogged down in a vastly greater struggle with Iran's deeply motivated population of almost 50 million.